

MEDIA AND THE AUDIENCE- DRIVEN DISSEMINATION OF NOTHINGNESS

Theoretical
article

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Abstract

On the one hand, the present paper tries to figure out the premises for the nowadays twisted relationship existing between mass media and audience in times when the televisual message gets continuously adapted in order to fit the needs of a chameleonic globalized audience that contradicts the growing ratings by declaring its discontent regarding the received mediated information. Therefore, the article tries to explain why people keep watching TV and prioritize exactly the media providers that offer them the least of what they supposedly look for. On the other hand, the study intends to shed a new light over the twists that take place in the mass media realm itself. If until recently the media have been known as the best providers of instrumental information that helped the public control the surrounding environment, the lately growing interest in general information may conduct to a change of paradigm in the self-attributed functions of both new and old mass communication media.

1. Introduction

During the last decade, public discussion regarding mass media and the content they have provided has revolved around one main issue namely the emptied message that travels towards the audience through all kinds of old and new channels. Lately, messages lacking in informational core have been encountered more and more frequently all over the World. People attack and discredit mass media by imputing them the constant chase for profit translated into the delivery of easy to digest infotainment. Moreover, public televisions have been losing ground at the same pace that private media holdings have flourished economically due to the unfaultable marketing mix: entertainment bound shows notwithstanding time or topic and advertising sales for the respective programs. The old debate that used to equal the selling of journalist space with the selling of part of the audience is long vanished. Advertising got naturalized and entered the people's realm of daily representations. Needless to say that when commercials get annoying one can always switch the channel or go to the next newspaper sheet. The sole lingering discussion seems to challenge the right of public mass media to deliver ads when also financially sustained by public budgeting.

At the same time mass communication means have to deal with the fight taking place within their own territory between *the old timers* representing the old fashioned way of doing written and audio-video journalism and *the newcomers* pleading for the supremacy of the Internet and for the user generated content.

Meanwhile, in spite of the internal hassle and external debate regarding the content of the media messages which are said to have stopped paying attention to the previously assumed educational purposes or even to information itself, audience numbers haven't been facing such a great dynamics as one would be

entitled to presume. Moreover, audience numbers seem to show that the media channels that have delivered more infotainment and less information were people's first choices in the last decade. The Romanian case is relevant in this respect and recent data comes to underline this observation: PROtv, KanalD and Antena1, all general commercial TV channels dedicated to delivering especially infotainment, occupied the first three positions in the rating list of the The Romanian Association for Audience Measuring (<http://www.arma.org.ro/ro/audiente>).

Is there a real discrepancy between what the public claims and what they actually consume? Do people love and hate *nothingness* at the same time? Is information still wanted and useful? A brief research presented further on within this paper will try to answer these questions by using an Internet based poll regarding media and the information consumption.

Why should such a poll present any interest? Because it might bring us closer to explaining the inconsistency that any one of us might feel when displaying general discontent regarding mass media, choosing to stop watching TV but spending lots of time on Facebook looking for the same type of content we ran away from when shutting off the TV sat. And this phenomenon is a global one as one of two people in the world is exposed to all sorts of messages produced and disseminated by different mass communication media. The same newspaper is read, sometimes even simultaneously, by an American and by an Asian reader, international radio news channels are listened to by people in different countries linked by the same understanding of a language, the same TV show is watched, each evening, by hundreds of thousands of people in the same country, at the same time. All these people are driven by the same need of being informed or entertained and get

connected to the same few sources of mass communication that deliver the same messages.

Traditional mass communication means make globalization possible by delivering messages that people consider useless. Consequently people create for themselves a Facebook account, enhance the phenomenon and become molders of reality. Notwithstanding, they meet the same Marry with a different hat. The information individually delivered on social networks is far from being a kind of information meant to help people to control their environment. Still Facebook counted no less than 1.1 billion users in March, 2013, according to Facebook Reports First Quarter 2013 Results (<http://investor.fb.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=76109>).

How can this be explained? My thesis would be that social pressure makes people less interested in getting instrumental information and more interested in receiving general information even if when talking about the chosen media content they complain about receiving *nothing* in fact.

In order to understand how this process might work, let's take a look inside the mass media mechanism and put it in relation with the globalized World we are leaving in.

2. Theoretical analysis

The American thinker Marshall McLuhan was talking, almost 50 years ago, in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), about a *global village* which would appear as a consequence of the masses being informed through mass media, having the same informational background and that it would be "dominated by a sort of spontaneous and unconscious solidarity, which he called planetary tribalism" (Coman, 1999).

Mass media become thus public and social networks creators. Consequently, more theoreticians drew the conclusion that one of the most important

functions of the mass media is creating an imaginary community. "Indeed, consuming mass media products, billions of people find themselves attached to each other with uncountable, insidious wires: being constantly exposed to the same messages, they get to share the same values and cultural representations, to possess similar knowledge, to think using similar information, ideas, stories and symbols. So, no matter how different an American, an African or an European could be, they can discover that they share the same moral judgment (...), that they know what happened in a specific country (...) because they have used the same sources of media information" (Coman, 1999, p.80).

The linkage function of mass media exercises, in the same manner, at the society level, where strangers get to interact having as a common discussion topic a show they use to watch or a newspaper they read. Sociologists have analysed this and concluded that mass media manage to create a new form of solidarity, characteristic to mass society. Another consequence of the linkage function is represented by the appearance of the public sphere, concept explored, among others, by Habermas. According to him, the public sphere came to life thanks to mass media and has been developing since the 18th century as "an area of public debate where problems of general interest can be discussed and opinions can crystallize" (Habermas, 1987 in Giddens, 2001). At the same time, the theoretician says that "the democratic development that has taken place in the modern societies is suffocated by the development of cultural industry" and so does the public sphere become a deception (*idem*).

Thus, the positive media influence over the audience is already showing us its vicious side. The *invisible hand of the market* (Smith, 1759) brought the global implementation of capitalist rules in the mass media realm and *nothingness* started taking over *meaningfulness* at a globalized

level. New media made use of the old media's capabilities of linking people together and took this function to another level both in terms of audience and of types of transmitted information.

Due to its fantastic reach, the Internet may be considered the most important channel used for information transmission in the 21st century. Recent data provided by www.internetworldstats.com presents us with an image regarding the evolution of the Internet since December 1995 when 16 million users were online. By counting no less than 2.260 million users in March 2012, McLuhan's global village ceased to be a fantasy and turned into a virtually lived scenario (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketimg.htm>).

Further data shows that in Europe only, at the end of the year 2011 there were no less than 500 million users, almost a third of the worldwide Internet coverage. Half of the European users had also had a Facebook account created (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm>).

By acknowledging the dimensions the online phenomenon has reached we have to remember about the other significant concept introduced by McLuhan (1962) in relation to the emergence of a global community – *planetary tribalism*, the worldwide net of connections between people that brings together similar interests, opinions and even the persons bearing them, from Sweden to South Africa. Thus, *new media* keeps the traditional functions of mass media going, making them more comprehensive and efficient.

Moreover, when discussing this aspect, Maxim (2009) considers *the commercial function* as one of the most important features of the Internet, next to informing and entertaining. Consequently, among other goods, information itself is transformed into a highly transactional product that circulates mostly freely and that is permanently moulded and enriched

by the needs or opinions of the masses connected to the Web.

Every time a piece of information is transmitted, changed or reordered, an act of communication is practiced. According to Maxim, "the Internet has introduced a *new concept of mass communication*, that of *many-to-many*. The Internet makes use of instruments that allow information to circulate from a group of users to another. The transmitter and the receiver are large groups of individuals" (2009). The new type of interaction mentioned by the author simplifies not only Laswell's theory regarding *mass communication* that implied the answers to five essential questions (who talks? what does he / she say? to whom? through what medium? what's the effect?), but also McLuhan's already minimal model, that requested only two answers in order to find out "who talked" and "what did he / she say" (Maxim, 2009).

People face a paradox: Internet seems to simultaneously complicate and simplify communication to such an extent that it becomes almost impossible to grasp the actors, the process and its consequences, making McLuhan's "the media is the message" (1962) theory look more applicable today than it did at any given moment before. In fact, it's the very existence of the technological medium that determines the apparition of *mass communication*: "Between the main communication entities, transmitter and receiver, there is a whole technological gearing. This system that multiplies the supports that transmit the same message to a larger and larger number of receivers, at the same time (...) turns mediated communication into *mass communication*" (Maxim, 2009).

So notwithstanding the differences between the old and the new technologies mass communication means bear the same main feature that of transmitting information due to their inner feature of being *a medium*. Informing the audience has been always considered to be the main

function of the media channels. Nevertheless, theoreticians also took into consideration the other functions of the media alleging that they would have less importance than the first one: interpretative, cultural, of entertaining and bringing people together (Coman, 1999; Dobrescu&Bârg oanu, 2003; Bertrand, 2001; Lazarfeld& Merton, 1972). McQuail(2003) talks about two categories of functions aimed towards the society as a whole and towards the individuals taken separately. Both categories also prioritize the informing function.

Correspondingly, there are a few types of information among which the instrumental one is “the queen of the ball” as they compose the “luggage” the person permanently needs in order to manage the surrounding environment, to be guided and to plan one’s daily existence. All kinds of media deliver specialized columns with information of immediate use. The weather forecast, traffic conditions but also news regarding home, gardening or pets. In 1945, Berelson put together an experiment that demonstrated people’s great need for utilitarian information. After a few month strike of written press journalists in New York, the sociologist published “What Missing the Newspapers Means”, a study that showed that the readers had felt more intensively the lack of instrumental information (theatre and cinema programs, novelty in shops or regarding urban transportation) than the scarcity of general information.

This type of information refers to data that is not vital for the individual. One can get around, observe and understand facts without it. But this informational background is the one that guides the individual in specific situations and helps one react when in certain contexts. “Even if we are specialists, we sometimes follow the stock market (...) latest scientific discoveries etc. Gathered deep within our memory, these facts offer us an informational capital that can be updated

to evaluate an event or to set a strategy”(Coman, 1999). As time passes by, the individual might find oneself in the situation of not being able to filter the informational flux coming towards him and which is of main importance for social adaptation. This task is taken over by the mass communication means that play the mediating role by selecting processing and transmitting the information to the public. Still, even if the media give the audience access to the message what people receive is not the exact reality but a cosmeticized form of it. “Journalistic text doesn’t offer raw information, as a report would do. It is firstly treated by the journalist in order to respond the audience’s needs” (Ro ca, 2001). Lazarfeld and Merton have emphasized on the fact that the modern individual’s need for information is raising due to the t communication means abundance. „One is prone to believe that knowing something about the issue of the day is the same with doing something to control it. One considers himself / herself to be informed and preoccupied (...) a raising in mass-media consumption can transform the individual’s energies, one passing from active participation to a state of passive knowledge (1999). The two sociologists named this passive state of the individual, consequence of the information oversaturation, *narcotization dysfunction*. Moreover, Freund introduced in his article “Journalisme et Mesinformation” (1991) the term “parainformation” which he defined as „a sweetened, approximate and minor version of the reality (...). Through “parainformation”, information is substituted with using images having relative and reduced significations, with sensationalism, or by personalizing problems that are not about persons”

These findings might explain nowadays people’s discontent regarding the old media, the very large numbers of Internet users as well as the attraction for social networking and Facebook like information that transforms the modern passive user into an active one. Moreover,

this comes in contradiction with the media theoreticians' former allegations and turns the linkage function of the media into a more important function than the informing one.

If people considered the old media to have made history by engaging 83 millions in front of the TV sat to find out "Who shot J.R.?" (*Dallas*, 1972) or another 528 million people to be part of Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon in 1969, the Internet succeeded into surpassing all the expectations. In 2012, the most appreciated image on Facebook brought together more than 1.8 million users who hit the "like" button of a picture displaying a resort like landscape from Bali (<http://socialweb.ro>). New media makes a new kind of media history: personal yet global, futile and yet intriguing. Once again, people demonstrate that they are interested in what is said to bring them *nothing*.

All the observations above conduct to the conclusion that media communication makes globalization possible. Still, the process is two-folded as the globalizing process models mass communication in return. According to McQuail's approach (2003) there are at least three layers exposed to different kinds of changes: 1) *construction* – there are many new kinds of communication channels and spaces and a continually changing "map" of uses; 2) *communication* or global *versus* local in media - communication is being delocalized and sped up; 3) *the global audience* - the main pattern of communication flow is changing in its balance from the "one to many" form of traditional mass media to consolatory and interactive forms.

Thus, globalization makes the media what they are today and as the media is the message (McLuhan, 1962) more than ever, it becomes clear that the globalization process also shapes the nowadays media content. According to Giddens: "the global extension of the

institutions of modernity would be impossible was it not for the pooling of knowledge which is represented by the <<news>>" (1996, p.77-78). So, in order to make out the face of the final product that reaches the audience (is it about *somethingness* rather about *nothingness*?) we should look into the ways the globalizing process displays.

A brief definition is given by Katzenstein according to whom "globalization is a process that transcends space and compresses time. It has novel transformative effects on world politics" (2005, p.13). The nowadays unfolding makes people take part in a global socially and culturally melting pot, one of the first features of the second modernity, *a postnational constellation*, as Habermas called it, where distances of any kind are not an issue anymore. This has been quite a fast process made possible due to the evolution of technology regarding media and transportation on the one hand and to the fact that borders became more and more permeable encouraging the phenomenon of migration on the other hand. Theoreticians (Beck, 2004; Giddens, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999) have looked into the phenomenon from different angles. Blurring of boundaries of the nation-state and concentrating economic and military force in the hands of the few *versus* the benefits of people and objects mobility, McDonaldization and the hegemony of the powerful cultures over the local and financially weaker ones *versus* the emerging of one sole *superculture*, the continually growing difference between the rich and the poor *versus* generalization of access to education and technology, the issue of dynamic identity and the individual reflexivity – all aspects have been put into debate during the last 20 years in connection to globalization.

As reflexive individuals making part of the recent modernity the individual is living globalized times in terms of politics, economics and culture. Identities

are more and more complex and diluted simultaneously. Solutions have been brought to fight the inevitable dissonances. For example, to somehow make Tomlinson's *superculture* (1999) a plausible concept, a *superlanguage* was proposed by Jean-Paul Nerrière, a retired vice-president of IBM in the United States. He created *Globish*, a simple and pragmatic form of English. The dedicated website (www.globish.com) provides free online courses and even books to meet the purpose of the initiative: to help people reach only one level in communication where everyone understands everyone else, everywhere in the world.

A seemingly bold yet less conciliating and rather pessimistic perspective is presented by George Ritzer within his article "Globalization of Nothing" (2003). The author pleads for a dichotomous approach with regard to *the good* and *the bad* in the process. Still in the end he reaches the conclusion that the individual is put in the position of fighting globalization with globalization (p.198) meaning mainly that society is stuck on a one way street where turning back is not an option. Ritzer's main thesis is that globalization is not a singular process. There are two main sub-processes he mentions instead: *glocalism* (integration of the global and of the local) and *grobalism* (imposition of the global over the local especially). The last term is based on the word "growth" and is thought as denoting the run after profit. Correspondingly, the two processes bring on two forms of manifestation: *glocalization* is connected with *something* mainly defined by "forms that are indigenously conceived and controlled and comparatively rich in distinctive content" while *grobalization* with *nothing* – "forms that are centrally conceived and controlled and largely lacking in distinctive content" (p.189). When cross cutting the two axes: global/glocal and something/ nothing Ritzer alleges that hybrid solutions may emerge. Thus, if *glocal something* is connected

with indigenous foods, *glocal nothing* may as well exist and be connected with "touristy food". At the same time, while Coca-Cola might be considered a *grobalm something*, gourmet foods as ParmeggianoReggiano, that is known world-wide but accessible only to some, becomes a *grobalm something*.

Somethingness and *nothingness* share their fans: "Opponents of globalization, fearing the homogenization of culture around the world, object, mainly, to the spread of what would be defined as nothing" (p. 192) while the ones praising for globalization as the key for development deny the existence of such a dichotomy.

Putting it all together, one may take the above mentioned audience's discontent for a reaction to globalized nothing. And if one may also equal the globalized *nothing* with general information how can one explain the persistence of very high TV ratings or billions of Internet users? The hypothesis I mentioned in the introductory part of this paper was talking about the social pressure that makes people look for dissatisfying general information.

3. Brief empirical inquiry

In order to test this assumption the next short research was assessed. I made a Facebook group and asked 100 people from my "friends list" what kind of information they were interested in when they watched TV (general, instrumental or prevention – the kind of information that helps people deal with different kinds of crisis - as a coming snow storm - about which they find out in advance from TV). I posted a secondary poll as well asking why they made the first choice. The given answers were: 1) Nowadays one has to be informed in order to deal with other people and with daily issues; 2) To be able to control my surrounding environment; 3) To be prepared to face whatever might come.

My sample was constructed on criteria of sameness in age, education, urban/rural provenience and TV channel choice. Thus, I was interested in people in their thirties from urban areas, who had a university degree and who used to watch two different Romanian commercial general TV channels with national coverage - PRO TV, Antena 1 and Kanal D. Both channels were positioned in the top of the general ratings list according to the April 2013 numbers provided by *The Romanian Association for Audience Measuring* (ARMA). My research focus was set on the evening news: two 45 minutes bulletins. I kept the poll opened on the social network one week as for all the people to have enough time to access it. Regarding the first question, the results were the following: 75 people said they were interested in instrumental information, 20 in prevention ones and only 5 said that general instrumental was important for them. When talking about people's motivation for being interested in a certain kind of news, 91 persons said they wanted to be informed while 9 said they wanted to be prepared for what would come. No one considered "controlling the surrounding environment" a real issue.

At the same time, I chose one day, namely Wednesday, to watch the evening news broadcasted by PRO TV, Antena 1 and Kanal D and I placed the delivered news into three categories according to their content. Thus I was interested in whether they provided general, instrumental or prevention information. The collected data looked as it follows: from PRO TV I got 25 news of which 23 were based on general info and two prevention ones, Antena 1 delivered 23 news, within its bulletin, of which 19 were general while three were focused on prevention and one was instrumental and Kanal D – 34 general news.

In all I counted no less than 82 general news, two delivering prevention messages and only one news based on instrumental information. Function to the

profile of each TV channel, the general news privileged crimes, political scandals, economic and social issues or autochthonous VIP's lives while the only instrumental topic was about the strike at the postal office and its consequence for the retired people who were to be deprived of their pensions for a least a few days.

Due to the presented results my brief research was a confirmatory enquiry. The hypothesis according to which people keep looking for general news even if they are interested in instrumental ones was confirmed. Moreover, their stated motivation for their choice might imply the existence of a social pressure they deal with every day by being interested in things that mean nothing to them in fact but which would rather help them to be accepted as part of nowadays society. Evidently, the motivational triggers need further research in order to be able to put a finger on the exact triggers that make people act the way they do. The limitations of the above research have to do with the relatively small number of respondents chosen on a subjective criterion - Facebook "friendship" - and also with the small number of questioned asked. Variables like gender, personal interests or hours spent in front of the TV might come useful for further initiatives on this topic.

4. Conclusions

All in all given the theoretical background presented within this paper and the results of the assessed research one main conclusion of this article is that given the globalized, informational world we are living in, people feel they have to be up to date with issues of no real importance to them thus making possible and continually sustaining the media globalization of nothingness.

At the same time, mass media theoreticians should take into consideration the revising of the hierarchy of the system's functions as the linkage one seems to have become at least of same importance as the informative one while

the interest for keeping the immediate environment under control is not an issue anymore (this probably being already checked?) in comparison to “having to be an informed person” notwithstanding real interest or even real discontent.

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